

ŚRĪ KUÑJA BIHĀRĪ DĀS BĀBĀJĪ

(1896-1976)

Kuñja Bihārī Dās Bābājī was a Tewari Brāhmaṇa from Meshya, a small village near Jhalda in the district of Purulia in northwestern Bengal. He was born Kunja Kishor Tewari on the Jhulan Purnima of 1896, the only son of Nilakamal Tewari and Muktamala Devi. He became interested in religious subject matters as a boy, learning the Bengali versions of *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa* from his uncle, Nilamadhab Tewari. It would appear that the Caitanyaite religion was not well known in the area at the time and his first religious attraction was to the *Rāma-carita Mānasa* of Tulasi Das. It was only in the mid-1920's that he first encountered the *Bhāgavata-purāṇa* with Rādhāvinoda Goswami's translation and commentary. As is often the case in such circumstances, Kuñja Kishor's parents worried about their only son's religious interests and had him married at a young age in order to assure his commitment to the family.

Even though he had only limited formal education, Kunja Kishor opened a primary school in his village where he taught for twenty years. His primary interests continued to be religious, but at the same time, he engaged his students in the nationalist (Svadeshi) movement by growing cotton and spinning it for the purpose of making homespun cloth.

He was particularly influenced by Nibaran Chandra Dasgupta, the publisher of Mukti magazine, which was the main organ of the Congress party in the district. Nibaran Chandra was also a Vaiṣṇava who saw inde-

pendence as a means for improving the status of the Caitanyaite religion. Kunja Kishor was much influenced by his teaching, in particular, his attitude toward the proliferation of religious leaders in Bengal claiming to be incarnations of God. He was also introduced by him to some of the more subtle aspects of the *Caitanya-caritāmṛta* teachings.



In 1922, Nilakamal Tewari died. Kunja Kishor followed the obligatory mourning rituals ending with the śrāddha ceremony, but shortly thereafter he fell ill and for about eight months was repeatedly at-

tacked by strong fevers. After this long illness, Kunja Kishor underwent a period, which lasted for about a month and a half during the rainy season of 1923, of what he himself described as *unmāda*, "insanity". He experienced this time as one of great joy and liberty, claiming to have had visions of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa and hearing divine sounds, etc. In his later life looked back on this period as a precursor of his experiences as a adept in Radha Kund.

In spite of all these distractions, Kunja Kishor's school continued to be a success with many of its graduates going on to win scholarships for further study. Thus, though he tended to use the school as a platform for religious and political activity, there was little objection from the school inspectors. One of his stranger classroom practices was to keep a human skull, found in a field, on display in order to remind his students of the impermanence of life. Gradually, the school grew and a new building with the aspect of an ashram was erected in the middle of a field and was given the name Sevāśrama. A three-day Vaiṣṇava festival, which continues to be held there annually, was inaugurated by Kunja Kishor's uncle Subal Chandra Tewari.

In the early 1930's, the influence of Sahajiya and Baul teachings began to be felt in the district and some close friends of the Tewari family also became members of these sects. Kunja Kishor felt very fortunate to meet a Vrindavan Vaiṣṇava who was travelling in the area at the time. From him he learned about many aspects of Vaiṣṇava teaching as preserved in Vrindavan, including the disciplic succession and the importance of the siddha-praṇālī in Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava tradition. Kuñja Kishor had been initiated by Gopal Chandra Thakur Goswami of Jhalda when only ten or eleven years old. He now took

steps to recover the knowledge of *siddha-praṇālī* which was the key to further advancement on the spiritual path. With renewed enthusiasm and armed with this deeper understanding of the orthodox tradition, he managed to convert several of his Sahajiya and Baul neighbours to the path of pure Vaiṣṇavism. This caused a stir and the Bauls started in a campaign of criticism against Vaiṣṇava orthodoxy. A great assembly was called together at the Sevāśram in November, 1934, to establish the supremacy of the orthodox movement. Many guest speakers from all over the Vaiṣṇava world were invited, led by the scholar Vrajendranath Chakravarti of Jhalda. The result of the meeting was that the influence in the district of the various Tantric subsets of Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇavism was seriously impaired.

Unfortunately, only a few weeks after this success, Kunja Kishor's wife died in childbirth. He continued his life as a teacher for several more years as he fulfilled his responsibilities towards his two daughters, Vinodinī Devī and Janakī Bālā, seeing to their education and marriage. During this time he continued to organize large assemblies in the name of the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava-Dharma-Saṁrakṣiṇī Sabhā (“Council for the protection of the Gauḍīya-Vaiṣṇava religion”). Those who had been initiated were encouraged to find out their *siddha-praṇālī*, while those who were initiated in heterodox movements were encouraged to seek reinitiation. He collected money so that mṛdaṅga and kīrtana classes could be given at Sevāśram and formed a kīrtana group with the students who participated.

Word of Kunja Kishor's close adherence to the Vrindavan orthodoxy reached the ears of Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Dās Bābājī of Rādhā Kuṇḍ, also originally from Jhalda, who wrote to him saying that he felt that Kunja Kishor

must have been a friend of his through many lives. The kindness of a great monk like Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Dāsī had a deep effect on Kuñja Kishor and his interest in material life diminished further. In 1937, during the Kumbha period (mid-winter), he went to Radha Kund for a month's holiday and accepted Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Dāsī as his śikṣā-guru, taking the Pañca-tattva and other mantras from him, as well as instructions about worship. Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Dāsī died a year later.

In 1939, Kunja Kishor went back to Braj with his mother, this time for good. He was immediately initiated into the renounced order of life by the renowned scholar Advaita Dās Bābājī of Govardhan, receiving the name Kuñja Bihārī Dās Bābājī. A few months later his mother also took the renounced order from Advaita Dāsī, receiving the name Mādhavī Dāsī. She continued to live in a room near the Gopa Kuwā at Shyam Kund before dying in 1944.

Kuñja Bihārī Dāsī found a cottage at Brajānanda Gherā, and with the help of donations received from his countrymen, he was able to greatly improve the building. In it, he established a publishing house

which he named the Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Śāstra Mandir after his śikṣā-guru. He published not only numerous books such as *Bhava-kūpe Jīver Gati*, *Paratattva Sammukhya*, *Bhakti-kalpa-latā*, *Bhakti-rasa-prasaṅga* and *Mañjarī-svarūpa-nirūpaṇa*, but many paintings and charts as well. The well-known scholar of Vaiṣṇava history and Bengali literature, Biman Bihari Majumdar, used *Bhakti-rasa-prasaṅga* as a required text for his M.A. course at the University of Patna.

In his introduction to the *Mañjarī-svarūpa-nirūpaṇa*, Kuñjavihārī Dāsī writes that his first acquaintance with the mood of the mañjarī was through his renunciation guru, Śrī Advaita Dās Bābājī of Govardhana, whom he called the foremost scholar of the Vaiṣṇava world, especially in the matter of sacred aesthetics or rapture. From that time on he became especially interested in the subject and began collecting references to the mood of the mañjarī whenever he came across them, paying special attention to the different ingredients necessary to produce the experience of sacred rapture in that mood. Later on, he had the opportunity to live for a long time with another great scholar and resident of Rādhā Kuṇḍ, Dīnaśaraṇa Dās Bābājī, and was able to study thoroughly all the literature on the subject. During that time, most of the materials found in this book were compiled. Later, other residents of the Kuṇḍ gave their encouragement and through financial help received from a number of sources, these materials were published as “An inquiry into the nature of Rādhā's handmaids”.

Kuñja Bihārī Dāsī made a great number of disciples, several of whom later became abbots of Radha Kund. His most celebrated disciple, Ananta Dās Bābājī, is a great scholar in his own right, who has published numerous works from the Kṛṣṇa Caitanya Śāstra Mandir.

Kuñja Bihārī Dās's influence continues to be felt in his homeland which its inhabitants identify with Jharikhand, the wild jungle country through which Caitanya passed on his way from Puri to Vṛndāvana in 1513, avoiding the more frequented route along the Ganges. The proportion of bābājīs living in Rādhā Kund who come from the westernmost part of Bengal is well over 50%. Vaiṣṇavism in Puruliya district continues to bear the strong stamp of the practices found in Radha Kund.

Kunja Bihari Dasji disappeared from this world in the year 1976 in the age of 80 years.

Compiled and translated by

Jan Brzezinski (Jagadananda Das)

On the basis of the pamphlet “Paramārādhya

Śrī-Śrī-gurudev Oṃ Viṣṇupād 108 Śrīmat Kuñja-bihārī

Dās Bābājī Mahārājer Caritāvalī o Sūcaka”, written by

Ananta Dās Bābājī (Vrindavan: Śrī-Keśava Dās, 1979).